Lowell Notes

Lucy Larcom

National Park Service
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Lowell National Historical Park

"We might all place ourselves in one of two ranks - the women who do something, and the women who do nothing; the first being of course the only creditable place to occupy."

-Lucy Larcom
A New England Girlhood (1889)

From the factories of Lowell to the schoolrooms of the western frontier to the literary circles of Boston, Lucy Larcom overcame difficult circumstances, exceeded expectations, and pursued unprecedented distinction as a female writer. Yet in an era in which many of her peers began to push against the limits that 19th-century society placed on women, Lowell's most famous "mill girl"-turned writer made a name for herself not by challenging the status quo, but by achieving individual distinction within it.

EARLY LIFE

Lucy Larcom was born March 5, 1824 to Lois and Benjamin Larcom in Beverly, Massachusetts, the ninth of ten children. When Lucy's father, a retired sea captain, passed away in 1832, her mother struggled with the family budget. Facing deepening debt, Lois made a pivotal decision: in 1835, she moved to the burgeoning industrial center of Lowell, Massachusetts with her three youngest daughters to find work.

LOWELL: LIFE ON THE LAWRENCE CORPORATION

Lawrence Manufacturing Company, 1860

The Larcoms' destination in Lowell was a boarding house owned by the Lawrence Manufacturing Company, one of Lowell's textile corporations. Lucy's mother, Lois, became a boardinghouse keeper, tasked with cooking and keeping house for up to forty female boarders who worked in the Lawrence Company's mills.

Like many keepers, Lois struggled to make ends meet. Soon after arriving in Lowell she brought Lucy and Emeline to the Lawrence Corporation to ask for work. The agent hired eleven year-old Lucy, the younger but taller girl,as a doffer. For Lois, sending a daughter into the mill meant one less uncompensated mouth to feed.

Accustomed to domestic drudgery, Lucy initially found work in the mill to be "only a new amusement." She and the doffers worked fifteen minutes out of every hour, changing filled bobbins on the spinning frames for empty ones. She spent free time playing and reading with the other doffers in a corner of the spinning room.

In 1835, mill workers under the age of fifteen attended school for three months out of every working year. Lucy excelled in school and was disappointed to have to return to the mill instead of attending high school full-time. Her pay, $1 per week after room and board, had become essential to her family's survival.

Lucy Larcom spent ten years in the mill, growing to adulthood within its hot, noisy, lint-filled confines. Despite a distaste for machinery, she found a redeeming sense of solidarity with her fellow workers. "I found that the crowd was made up of single human lives, not one of them wholly uninteresting," she wrote. Lucy eventually became a spinner, then a cloth dresser, and finally settled in the cloth room measuring and folding finished cloth. The latter job was poorly paid compared to her previous positions, but afforded her a relatively clean, quiet space that often provided the opportunity to read.

LITERARY LOWELL

"I defied the machinery to make me its slave," Lucy Larcom wrote years after her experiences in Lowell. "Its incessant discords could not drown the music of my thoughts if I would let them fly high enough." Seeking to mitigate the numbingly routine world of the factory, she turned to poetry. Hymns and verses extolling the virtues of nature - in her view, antidotes to factory life - were her favorites, and she read as frequently as possible at work. " The printed regulations forbid us to bring books into the mill, so I made my window-seat into a small library of poetry, pasting its side all over with newspaper clippings," she recalled.

Despite being unable to attend high school regularly, Lucy eagerly took in night classes, as well as lectures at the Lowell Lyceum. In 1837, Lucy's older sister Emeline joined a literary circle associated with Lowell's Congregational Church, and Lucy soon followed. In the mid-1830s, literary circles became popular among female mill workers, providing an opportunity to share original poems and essays. The circles represented a chance for "mill girls," often regarded as an indistinct mass of factory operatives, to express their individual voices.

Lucy and Emeline soon began publishing poetry in the *Operatives' Magazine*, a publication of their literary circle. The *Magazine* merged with the *Lowell Offering*, a similar publication, in 1842. As "a repository of original articles, written by females actually employed in the mills," the *Offering* gained national attention for its conservative tone, literary quality, and the identity of its contributors, among whom Lucy became prominent. She published many poems and articles in the *Offering*, often on the subject of nature and religion. The poet John Greenleaf Whittier, whose poetry Lucy particularly admired, attended a meeting of *Offering* contributors and complimented Larcom on her verse. At first embarrassed, Lucy eventually came to count Whittier as a mentor and lifelong friend.

In the pages of the *Offering*, Lucy Larcom developed her early identity as a writer. While her poetry expressed a distinct voice, it remained strictly within the sphere of polite feminine discourse. When some of her colleagues, notably Sarah Bagley, became critical of the mill corporations and advocated reform, Lucy steadfastly preferred less controversial topics. When female workers struck against long hours and poor pay, she refused to join them, believing it "unwomanly." And when her friends discussed women's suffrage, she expressed markedly mixed feelings on the subject.

FRONTIER SCHOOLTEACHER

Monticello Female Seminary, Godfrey, IL

The *Lowell Offering* ceased publication in 1845, and the following year Lucy Larcom left Lowell for the western frontier with Emeline, Emeline's husband, their baby, his brother, and a female friend from Lowell. Though regretfully leaving behind her fellow "mill girl" writers, twenty-two year-old Lucy looked forward to building a new life far beyond the confines of Lowell's mills.

After a wearisome journey, they arrived in Looking Glass Prairie, Illinois. Accustomed to the bustling industrial city of Lowell, Lucy found the rural vastness of the West was both liberating and trying. Used to working fourteen hours in the mills, she found her new occupation teaching in far-flung one-room schoolhouses to be a demoralizing challenge. Eventually Lucy obtained a more stable position teaching at a school in the town of Woodburn.

Lucy and Emeline's brother-in-law, Frank Spaulding, developed a close relationship. When in 1850 Frank continued westward in search of gold, they began a long correspondence in which he begged her to join him as his wife. What began as a series of love letters became increasingly one-sided as time wore on; by her early thirties, Lucy was referring to herself as an "old maid" whose singular purpose in life was to write.

Life in Illinois did allow Lucy the opportunity to further her passion for learning. In 1849 she enrolled in the Monticello Female Seminary in Godfrey, which provided young women the chance, unique at the time, to obtain a rigorous academic education. After completing her studies, Lucy became head of Monticello's Preparatory School, a position that fostered her commitment to not only writing, but also to teaching young minds.

MASSACHUSETTS TEACHER, ABOLITIONIST, POET

1869 Issue of *Our Young Folks* Magazine

In 1853, Lucy Larcom, now a confident adult determined to devote her life to her professional calling, moved back to Massachusetts. From 1854-1862 she taught at Wheaton Seminary (later to become Wheaton College), another institution committed to women's academic education. Highly respected by her students for promoting free discussion in the classroom, Larcom founded a literary society and two literary magazines - one of which, the *Rushlight*, still exists today - during her time at Wheaton.

In the 1850s, the national debate surrounding slavery intensified, and Lucy's private support for abolition gained a public place in her poetry. In 1855, the same year that Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, she won a national contest for a verse promoting the settlement of Kansas as a free territory. "Freedom is the noblest pay/For the true man's toil," she wrote. Admirable as her stand against slavery was, her abolitionism was not radical - she consistently championed mainstream arguments in favor of free labor and liberty, rather than taking a more radical stance on racial equality.

In 1854 Lucy published her first book of nature poetry, *Similitudes*, and by 1862 had left Wheaton in favor of pursuing writing full-time, publishing many individual poems as well as several books. She had rekindled her friendship with John Greenleaf Whittier, and the two corresponded warmly on subjects poetic, personal, and abolitionist. In 1875 she became the editor of a new literary magazine for children, *Our Young Folks*, a position that combined her passions for literature and for pedagogy. During her tenure at the magazine, she published work by Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Louisa May Alcott. Lucy also collaborated with Whittier during this time to publish two volumes of poetry for children; once Lucy's mentor, Whittier now regarded her as a deeply respected literary colleague.

LEGACY

In her lifetime, Lucy Larcom published fifteen volumes of her own poetry and other writings, in addition to editing others. Her most enduring work is, however, a work of prose, an 1889 memoir focusing on her early life entitled *A New England Girlhood*. Truly a woman of her own century - embodying the Lowell "mill girl," the frontier schoolteacher, the acomplished author, the abolitionist - Lucy Larcom's dedication to poetry, to learning, and to her own pursuit of success may not have been revolutionary, but were no less than the achievements of a remarkable woman.